

Health Information Compliance Alert

Reader Questions: Take Care With This Sensitive Material and Information

Question: My clinic performs COVID-19 vaccinations. Can we dispose of the vials and syringes like we would for any other vaccine?

New Jersey Subscriber

Answer: The short answer is that fraud surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine is a problem, and you may need to adjust your habits. The HHS Office of Inspector General (OIG) has recently released a fraud alert warning of scams surrounding COVID-19. One of their recommendations is to "[b]e mindful of how you dispose of COVID-19 materials such as syringes, vials, vial container boxes, vaccination record cards, and shipment or tracking records. Improper disposal of these items could be used by bad actors to commit fraud."



The Department of Defense, in a February 2021 memo, recommended that providers: "Treat vials and packaging similarly to medical waste by placing in red sharps container; or ... Deface all or safely crush materials so it cannot be reintroduced or reproduced. After the products are sufficiently defaced, then dispose with regular waste."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that expired or compromised vaccines, including some unused or diluent doses, unopened vials, expired vials, and potentially compromised vials can be returned for credit even if they must be discarded. However, open or broken vials/syringes, manufacture-filled syringes, and vaccine pre-drawn by the provider cannot be returned and should be discarded. Empty vaccine vials are, for the most part, not considered hazardous or pharmaceutical waste and thus do not need to be disposed of in a biomedical waste container. Ultimately, however, you should contact your immunization program or state environmental agency for guidelines.

The general consensus from various companies that manage medical waste is that syringes should go into sharps containers.